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SUBJECT: POLITICAL PARTIES ACCUSE GOVERNMENT OF MEDDLING IN ELECTIONS

Classified By: CDA Steven Koutsis, Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

(C) Summary

-- Mauritania's political parties have denounced the government for allegedly pressuring candidates to leave their parties and run as independents in coming elections.

-- In addition, National Democratic Institute reps have "felt pressure to increase our engagement with independent candidates."

-- Meanwhile, the government maintains it is neutral, describing the whole brush-up as "politics."

(C) Comments

-- Little doubt remains that the government has indeed been encouraging candidates to run as independents.

-- For many, this is proof that the military council will not stand by as the objective caretaker government, but will instead take steps to shape the electoral outcome.

-- While the impact of the government's actions are yet to be known, the mere fact that they decided to intervene is troubling, and could be an indication of future interference.

-- Theories abound as to what the government is up to. The most credible is that the government wants to pack the parliament with independent candidates, who will in turn support an independent candidate for president, cutting the political parties out of the process.

End Summary and Comments.

¶1. (C) Over the past 10 days, a majority of Mauritania's influential political parties and party coalitions have accused the government of interfering in the electoral process. The alleged interference comes at a key moment in the political transition. Registration of candidate lists for November 19 municipal council elections run from September 20 - 30. These elections are important as municipal councils elect senators. The registration period

for legislative elections runs from October 3-18. Clearly, any reaction to the government's moves, no matter how strong, may be too late to have any effect.

THE POLITICAL PARTY POSITION

12. (C) According to a majority of Mauritanian political parties, the government has begun contacting leading party figures and influential members of civil society to encourage them to run as independent candidates, rather than on political party slates. According to various parties, the government has succeeded in convincing scores of candidates to leave their parties and run as independents.

13. (U) On September 24, 22 political parties (including nearly every major party) joined together to form "The National Meeting for the Defense of Democracy (RNDD)," to protest the governments actions and call for the transitional authorities to "immediately stop their intervention in the political process."

14. (C) In a September 26 meeting with representatives from the leading political party coalition "Coalition of Forces for Democratic Change (CFCD)," presidential candidate Ahmed Ould Daddah told Charge that Mauritania's political parties "had worked well with the transitional government since August 3...but now our trust in the government is broken and we are very concerned." Daddah explained that "the government has been contacting the most notable Mauritians in our coalition and telling them that our parties aren't organized or capable of governing and that they should run

NOUAKCHOTT 00001193 002 OF 003

instead as independents."

15. (C) Cheikh Ould Horma, president of the political party "Rally for Mauritania" told Charge that "the government is trying to assemble a powerful group of independent candidates together." "If this group of independents gains power, they will form a new party, similar to the PRDS (the former party of President Taya)," Horma said, adding that "this new group would be controlled by those currently in power." Horma and the other CFCD members added that the transitional government would secretly provide these independent candidates with significant campaign funding to ensure their success.

16. (C) Responding to Charge's question about the progress of municipal council candidate registrations, Daddah said "the current crisis has consumed political parties' attention, and many parties have been unable to register all their candidates in each race."

THE GOVERNMENT'S POSITION

17. (C) In a September 26 meeting Secretary General of the Presidency Habib Ould Hemet (who holds ministerial rank and is the chairman of the inter-ministerial committee on elections) told Charge that the government "remains committed to its principles of neutrality and transparency." Hemet said "we have met with interested political parties and reassured them of our commitment to neutrality," adding that "there has been a misunderstanding and I believe this will all be resolved in the coming days." He added "these recent developments are merely election fervor which will rise and fall as the elections approach."

18. (C) Responding to Charge's question about his concern for the political party unrest, Hemet said "its just politics...so I am not concerned," adding that "August 3 was about returning choice to Mauritania, and the government is committed to doing so in a neutral and transparent manner." "Political parties must play a central role in these

elections, but there is also a role for independents," Hemet concluded.

NDI'S VIEWS

¶9. (C) National Democratic Institute (NDI) Resident Director Jacques Veilleux told PolOff that NDI is "extremely concerned about the government's recent moves," adding that NDI "has also felt pressure to increase our engagement with independent candidates." Veilleux explained that in a recent meeting with representatives from the Ministry of Interior, NDI was "strongly encouraged" to include independent candidates in its training sessions and debate planning. "We told the officials that, as our goal was to reinforce the role and capacity of political parties, we would not alter our plans and include independent candidates," Veilleux said, adding that "these officials clearly had their marching orders on this subject."

¶10. (C) Personally, Veilleux believes the government is encouraging independent candidates in order to weaken political parties (and ultimately the parliament) in an effort to maintain the influence of the current powerbase. "A parliament of mostly independents will be fractious and weak, and much easier to control," Veilleux said, adding "particularly by those currently helping to get them elected."

¶11. (C) Veilleux warned that "without a strong parliament acting as a check on the power of the presidency, the government will be run entirely from the top," adding that "we have already seen the dangers such a balance of power poses." Veilleux concluded the point by saying that "in order for this democratic transition to succeed, and for democracy to truly take root, we must work to strengthen Mauritania's democratic institutions, in this case, its political parties."

NOUAKCHOTT 00001193 003 OF 003

WHAT ARE THEY UP TO?

¶12. (C) While it is unclear why the government has taken this step, several theories have emerged. The most credible is that the authorities want to pack the parliament with independent candidates, who would be more beholden to the present authorities. Those legislators would in turn back an independent candidate for president (presumably one acceptable to the authorities). Under this scenario, the present rulers would be assured of favored treatment by the new government.

¶13. (C) Meanwhile, the Ambassadors of France, Spain, and Germany collectively met with Hemet on September 22 to express their concern over these latest events, and French media has reported that President Jacques Chirac raised the issue of neutrality during his meeting with Colonel Vall on September 26. Following the meeting, an Elysee spokesman stated that Chirac "expressed to Col Vall his confidence in Mauritania's ability to carry through the democratic transition started under his authority. France supports the process which is under way by continuing its cooperation with Mauritania."
Koutsis